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The Moral Issues of the Great War



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In the present crisis, which is certainly one of the greatest in history, our first duty is to understand the issues involved, for the reason that we must know what is true if we are to do what is right. In speaking on this theme the minister makes use of a much appreciated privilege and he also fulfils a duty. He cannot leave it alone if he would, and he would not if he could. No form of service is more needed than that which he tries to render; none promises more for human welfare than that of the thinker and teacher who clarifies thought, illuminates difficult situations and sets in clear light the ideals that are our true goals.

Nothing will conduce more to winning the war, to a victory which will bring a lasting peace, than a perfect understanding by the American people of the principles at stake and of the frightful disaster which a failure on our part would bring not only upon us but upon all that we care for in the world. If we are clear-sighted and resolute, we may have good hope of a victory which shall be a victory of the finest ideals of civilization, a victory in which even Germany will sometime rejoice. That country has taken and maintains an attitude such that her defeat is a necessity of civilization. Our victory, to bring peace to the world, must be not only physical but moral. And there can be no moral victory unless the world understands the real significance of what has happened, unless the Germans, the neutrals, and we ourselves see with perfect clearness that the defeat of Germany is the natural and inevitable consequence of her moral isolation, and that this moral isolation necessarily results from her policy—a policy which will always arouse the hostility of the world against the nation that adopts it.

Rarely in human history have the main facts been so indisputable or the principles involved so clear. Never in all time, perhaps, has a nation entered a great struggle more deliberately or with a greater purity and nobility of motive. We are under no illusions of ambition. We know that we can gain no territory, wealth, trade or material advantage of any kind, and we fully realize the sacrifices we are making of human life and happiness. The cost in blood and treasure will be incalculable, yet we pay it because we must, because only in this way can we protect that which gives to life its worth. And when we have won, we shall have gained nothing for ourselves which other nations, our enemies included, will not enjoy.



To the clear minds which for years have watched the coming of the storm, it is all as light as noonday. The mass of the people understood by instinct. They were, therefore, never neutral in feeling, for from the very beginning there was a recognition of the fact that the success of German policy in the world would make American democracy impossible. This feeling was profoundly just, as it is perfectly easy to show. It was morally impossible for this nation to stand apart and see others battling desperately for interests which are ours as much as theirs, and it became more and more clear that if they failed we would go down in their fall. It was well to be deliberate and reluctant, possibly even when the treatment of Belgium and the sinking of the Lusitania showed the nature of the power that threatened us, but we could not, consistently either with our real interest or our honor and self-respect, have put off our entrance into the conflict a moment longer.

In our effort to understand the present crisis, we must first of all put aside irrelevant and merely subsidiary questions. It is not helpful to talk about the private virtues of the German people. These are ungrudgingly and gladly admitted. Nor is it a question of the value of German science and art. These, too, like the science and art of other peoples, are of value to all men, and nobody wishes to disparage or depreciate them in any way. Nor is it true, as has often been asserted, that this war is a conflict without principle, a struggle of greedy powers for purely material advantage, in which case it would not matter much which side wins. False, too, is the assertion that increasing armaments have caused the war. In fact, the armament of France and the British navy have saved Europe from the domination of the Kaiser and the men about him.

The outstanding fact, which no sophistry or special pleading can obscure, is that for several decades Germany has been preparing to repeat on a grander scale her lucrative conquests of the past. Germany has been built up largely by war. Mirabeau said truly that "War is the national industry of Prussia." We see a definite policy steadily adhered to. Silesia was taken, then Schleswig-Holstein, Austria was defeated, and when complete preparation had been made France was conquered and deprived of provinces and an immense indemnity is exacted. The war of 1870 was a great financial success. It cost Germany about 250,000,000 dollars. All this France had to pay and three times

as much more, and besides give up territory rich in minerals and containing 1,500,000 people.

It has long been perfectly clear to the observing that a new stroke was preparing. Just when it would come, we did not know. That it would fall on France seemed certain. If defeated, she would be drained of her wealth, stripped of her colonies, deprived of her remaining coal and iron fields, and reduced to a position of complete dependence upon Germany. Some few realized that even greater ambitions were cherished by the autocratic rulers of Germany, but when these facts were stated the average American was incredulous, and it has taken the events of the war to convince us that any country could act on a policy so out of accord with our ideas of what is civilized and humane and our feeling for what is right.

It is now evident that the attack was scientifically prepared through many years, and that the men who dispose of the resources of Germany, who direct its national policy, who control education and through it direct public sentiment, were mobilizing all the resources of that mighty country in order to repeat Bismarck's performance on an immense scale.

One of the greatest advantages possessed by the men who planned and brought on this war was their entire freedom from moral scruple. In the last two decades we have become accustomed to the frank avowal of the doctrine that ethical principles do not apply in international relations. Of course, this is not new. Hegel taught it. He said the state is sovereign and is responsible to nothing. But so long as only philosophers talk this way, not much attention is paid to ethical cynicism. The doctrine becomes a frightful menace, however, when it is accepted by the people. For it practically means that the state can do no wrong, that what in the individual would be an atrocious crime the state may without blame commit, if it is believed to be for its interest. The world has been astonished by the ruthless way in which the German government has carried on this war, but it really had fair warning. The fact that it took some time for other peoples to realize that in Germany ethics is considered to be a private matter, which the state need not regard, is much to their credit, but it was a great initial disadvantage, since they failed to provide against an ethical cynicism which seemed to them absurd. The policy of

frightfulness, of terrorizing the world into submission, was announced beforehand, but that civilized men would carry it out so thoroughly as Germany has done was, until we had seen it, simply beyond belief.

"Twelve years before the invasion of Belgium, the General Staff of the German Army in contravention of all the principles of international law, instructed its Generals, to quote its exact words, that

'A war conducted with energy cannot be directed merely against the combatants of the enemy State and the positions they occupy, but it will and must in like manner seek to destroy the **total intellectual and material resources** of the latter. The argument of war permits every belligerent State to have recourse to all means which enable it to attain the object of the war.'

"The same war manual provides that it is the duty of German Commanders 'ruthlessly to employ the necessary means of defense and intimidation.' And again, that a commanding officer neglects his duty unless he resorts to 'the ruthless employment of such severity.'"

In all great wars there are occasions when infuriated soldiers get beyond control and commit outrages, but this is the first time that we have witnessed cruelty by order from above, ruthlessness made a deliberate national policy. There surely must have been times when German soldiers and officers have obeyed with extreme reluctance the cruel orders given. We like to believe the story of one of them who was asked by a suffering civilian if he had a heart and replied, "I had, but it is broken." Every report of acts of generosity or sympathy has been to us like refreshing rain to a land perishing from drought. We do not like to believe that, though they obey their autocratic leaders in outward acts, the German people have lost the human feelings which would make it impossible for them to approve of such acts, feelings without which men cease to be human.

In his address at Washington University recently, an Italian officer translated the first and last sentences of a proclamation found on the bodies of German soldiers killed in the last great battles in Italy. In substance, they were as follows: "Soldiers, as you pass into Italy, you must not

allow yourselves to be influenced by pity for the Italian women and children. Remember that revenge is sweet. Soldiers, this unwarlike Italian flesh must be no more to you than the manure on the fields which are Italian today and will be German tomorrow."

To speak of these things, or even to think of crucified Belgium and tortured Armenia, is painful, so painful that we face these facts only because we must, because it is necessary to realize that the men who decide when and how Germany makes war stop at absolutely nothing. Apparently they are trying now to destroy the recuperative power of France and England so that even though these countries win they will be ruined. Everything has been thought of, nothing is left to chance, not even cruelty. Nothing is to stand in the way of success. Anything that can strike terror into other peoples is regarded as legitimate and all who protest called hypocrites, it being incredible to the military masters of Germany that others should be moved by principles to which they are insensible.

What would be the consequences of German victory? They are clear beyond the slightest doubt. Among them would be—

1. The ruin of France. The reason is apparent at a glance. France would cease to be an industrial nation because she would lose her remaining resources of coal and iron. She was crippled in 1870, being deprived at that time of part of her mineral-bearing lands. To give up the rest, as she must in case of a German victory, would be to surrender first her economic independence and then necessarily her political independence. According to the International Geological Congress of 1913, Germany has fifty-five per cent of Europe's coal, i. e., twice as much as all the continental states, twice as much as Great Britain, and twenty-five times as much as France. Recently she has taken three-fourths of what remained to France, and the few coal fields still in French possession are thin and irregular.

In this war Germany has also secured possession of the principal iron fields of France, and if she is able to keep them and the coal lands beside, she will grow rapidly in population and power, while France, dependent upon Germany for these essentials factors of industrial life, will shrink to small proportions. Her birth rate will fall still lower and her people, unable to make a living at home, will have to emigrate. This

is the last chance of this great country. If she goes down now, she cannot by any possibility regain her place in the world. Germany, with the coal and iron and potash lands of France, Poland and western Russia, will be absolute master of Europe's resources and consequently irresistible. France, like ancient Greece, will be irretrievably ruined and her greatness, her service to art, and science and human culture, will soon be a memory. She can live only as her German neighbors permit. Without coal, iron or industry, she can never again equip a fleet and army, and must be counted out in any future struggles for democracy.

2. It is now beyond question that the Kaiser and his supporters meant to break up and succeed to the British Empire. What would the world gain or lose if this attempt were to succeed? Again, the answer is obvious. The British Empire is not really an empire. It is not even a league to enforce peace. It is actually a voluntary association of self-governing nations. If Canada or Australia, for instance, decided to sever the bonds of union with the mother country, not the slightest resistance would be offered. Up to the time the present war broke out, all nations, Germany included, were free to trade wherever waved the British flag. The only cases that even looked like an exception were the few in which the colonies themselves, for revenue purposes and over English protest, established a tariff and gave some preference in duties to British merchants.

Suppose all this changed, and that the German flag were flying over the British colonies. No one doubts that an empire controlled by the Kaiser and his associates would be a real empire. Coercion would take the place of the present voluntary association, and everything would be exploited in the interest of the autocratic masters of the world.

The colonies realize this and do not wish to give up their practical independence for a regime of coercion, of direction from Berlin. What the change would mean is clear even in India. Few people adequately realize that India is not a nation, but a vast land inhabited by peoples differing extremely in racial stock, language, stage of culture and religion. It had been a cockpit for centuries, suffering from an anarchy so complete that it can hardly be said to have a history. English influence in India was for a long time that of merchants and traders, and the government took over the affairs of the India Company only when it

became absolutely necessary. Even today native states comprise one third of the area, and contain one-fourth of the population of the country.

The British government has recently pledged itself to give India self-government as fast as natives can be trained to take the responsibility. Sir Francis Younghusband writes,—“The goal of British policy in India is no longer in doubt. It has been stated clearly and authoritatively and quite recently. It is not the perpetual maintenance of the present bureaucratic autocracy, the continuance of benevolent despotism. It is, as announced in Parliament last August, the increasing association of Indians in every branch of the administration, and the gradual development of self-governing institutions, with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire. Ultimate self-government, to be gained by successive stages is then the goal of British policy in India.” That is, the English are trying to do in India what we are aiming at in the Philippines. Success requires time and patience. If the English should leave India, there is every reason to suppose that it would slip back into the hideous mess in which they found it, just as a sudden abandonment of our East Indian islands would mean, not freedom to their populations, but the alternation of anarchy and Oriental tyranny, which are the only things they have ever known.

German success would mean, if not the end of the hopeful democratic movements in the world, at least a tremendous reverse for human liberty. For self-governing peoples the state is a means to an end, the end being the welfare and happiness of individual men, women and children. The business of the state is to provide and maintain secure and favorable conditions of life, leave personal initiative free, and use the least possible coercion. Our so-called rulers are, and realize that they are, our agents. This regime has certain defects and is at a disadvantage when it has to do with autocratic militant neighbors, but it opens a career to every talent, gives hope and opportunity to all, and develops liberty-loving, resourceful men.

The German theory is that the state is an entity, superior to the people, and in the present autocratic social organization of Germany the initiative is with a group of men who feel that they rule by divine right. Impulsion is from the

top. Every man stands on a certain level and must accept direction from above. Docile to those higher up, he may be domineering to the unfortunate ones below. Intolerable as such a regime is to men and women who have grown up under freer institutions, it is especially effective both in war and in preparation for war. The whole resources of the nation can be mobilized and disposed of by a single will. The present war has shown that democracies are at a tremendous disadvantage when contending with an autocracy and that they can never enjoy any security in a world which is part autocratic and part free.

3. What a German victory would mean to the United States stands before us in vivid light. There are only two possibilities. We must either submit to German dictation and acquiesce in a German policy of exploitation throughout the world, or fight. The domineering temper of the Imperial government could hardly be changed for the better by victory and mastery of Europe's resources. Sons of such fathers as we have had, we know that we could not tamely submit. The inevitable consequence of German victory would be war. For a century we can not reasonably expect anything but war or gigantic preparations for war. In either event, we must definitely bid good-bye to the America we have loved so much.

Why this is so, why it can not possibly be otherwise, is evident. Democracy is not compatible with war. Many a battle has been won by a poor general, never one by a debating society. When a democracy engages in war, one of the first things it has to do is to confer vast powers upon its executive. All the resources of the country must be at the disposal of those who are responsible for the direction of the war. The old liberties, the private rights so dear to the common man, must be given up while the conflict lasts. It is but a little while since we entered the great war, and already we have conscription, government control of railways and of business, and we are finding out what it is to be told what we may eat and wear. This is only a beginning, and we are prepared to submit to further restriction and control, because when peace returns we expect a return of the old conditions. But unless we win and the German autocracy which brought this great disaster upon the world is defeated, the old conditions will not and can not possibly return either in our lifetime or in that of our children. In

the terrific conflict we would have to wage against the mightiest empire in history, one that is influenced by no moral scruples whatever, this country would have to centralize and organize its administration in a more effective way or lie prostrate like Russia before a ruthless conqueror. The impossibility of the co-existence of American democracy and the German autocracy bent on conquest, is so obvious that all the world can see.

Which shall triumph? Shall democracy go down before the Kaiser and centuries elapse before such life as we have known be possible again? Or are we to escape the eclipse of freedom, and enter an era of friendly co-operation of all nations, small as well as great, weak as well as strong, in the task of building of civilization? This, and no other, is the question we must answer. What is before us is not war in the abstract, but this war which we could avoid only through surrender of what gives life its worth. The heart of the American people is sound, and their instincts unperverted, and this is why, although opposed to war in general, they are whole-hearted and resolute in this war. What they felt from the beginning they now clearly see, despite insidious propaganda and the confusion wrought by those who can not distinguish the main question which alone matters now from the many subsidiary and more irrelevant questions which they constantly seek to bring into the foreground. Fortunately we saw the truth in time, and did not, from blindness or baseness, put off the acceptance of our rightful share in the struggle until we could no longer find allies in the world.

4. What a German victory would mean for France. Great Britain and the United States I have tried to show. What would be the fate of the rest of our allies I must pass over that I may have space to make clear one result of the greatest consequence to all the contending nations, to the neutrals—in fact, to civilization. The effect of Teutonic success would be to give increased prestige among all peoples to the German view that ethics counts for nothing in international relations; that the state as a mystical, transcendental and supreme entity, may do what seems to it for its own interest and disregard right and wrong as mere private and individual interests. Whence this ethical cynicism? It has already been said that Hegel taught it. That does not mean that he is solely or chiefly responsible for its present vogue. In fact, both he and Fichte can be quoted in support of the opposite view. Moreover, although what they said is

strangely like what Germany is now saying and although they helped "to provide the Junkers with their philosophy," the main cause of the political demoralization is more recent. But it is worth while to note in passing that while the systems of these famous thinkers are obsolete, some ideas which "originated as parts of their remote and technical systems have, by multitudes of non-reflective channels, infiltrated into the habits of imagination and thought" of the present generation, and now serve as the "framework of a national fanaticism."

This amazing ethical cynicism is probably due primarily not to any philosophy but to successful and lucrative violence from Frederick the Great to Bismarck. But intelligent men are prone to defend their policies before others and justify them for themselves by some philosophy or other, and the chief reliance of the German intellectuals of today is upon a form of neo-Darwinism. An American scholar, Professor Vernon Kellogg, who, as chief representative of the American Relief Commission, used to frequent the Great Headquarters of all the German armies in the West, has had excellent opportunities for knowing the real convictions of the men of light and leading—"men who had exchanged, for the moment, the academic robes of the Aula for the field-gray uniforms of the army." Their view in substance is as follows:

Human evolution is the result of natural selection in a struggle which is rigorous and ruthless. Within limited social groups, such as nations, it is possible and permissible to give some scope to altruism or the law of mutual aid, but the competition between these groups is of the exterminating kind and is not to be limited in any way.

This gospel of the German intellectual class is clearly and concisely stated by Professor Kellogg in the *Atlantic Monthly* for August, 1917. "This struggle not only must go on, for that is the natural law, but it should go on, so that this natural law may work out, in its cruel, inevitable way, the salvation of the human species. By its salvation is meant its desirable natural evolution. That human group which is in the most advanced evolutionary stage as regards internal organization and form of social relationship is best, and should, for the sake of the species, be preserved at the expense of the less advanced, the less effective. It should win in the struggle for existence, and this struggle should occur precisely that the various types may be tested, and the best not only preserved, but put in a position to impose

its kind of social organization—its Kultur—on the others, or, alternatively to destroy and replace them.”

That this justification of military aggression, this “reasoned savagery,” is a misinterpretation of Darwinism, or rather of the process of evolution, is not hard to show, or would not be hard to show, if reason were the court of decision. But the Germans have appealed to Mars. Let the conflict decide, they say. “If Germany is beaten, it will prove that she has moved along the wrong evolutionary line, and should be beaten. If she wins, it will prove that she is on the right way, and that the rest of the world, at least that part which we and the allies represent, is on the wrong way and should, for the sake of the right evolution of the human race, be stopped, and put on the right way—or else be destroyed as unfit.”

Precisely, and here is the moral danger of civilization. The Germans believe this, and if they win they will interpret their victory as nature’s justification of their philosophy and their war of aggression and conquest. “If nature and reality be for us, who can be against us?” Who would ever dare in the future to assert that ethical principles apply in international relations? Not only does such a view lead kind-hearted men to defend the wholesale murder of the Lusitania passengers and the ruin of Belgium and northern France and pervert their moral judgment of the whole war, but it makes it impossible to hope to convince them by argument. When men say, “We appeal to struggle and wait for nature’s decision,” other men can only fight or submit. And no nation that sincerely holds this view will ever live peacefully with its neighbors if it thinks that in a war of conquest its chances are good.

It is clear, then, that the effect of a Teuton victory would be to confirm the Germans in their belief that ethical principles are restricted in their application within limited groups and need not be regarded by nations in their dealings with one another. Moreover, similar conclusions would be drawn in other countries and the demoralization would be widespread. That this was actually the effect upon English opinion of the apparent prosperity of France under Napoleon the Third, has been pointed out by John Morley in a memorable passage in his essay entitled “**On Compromise**”:

“A minor event, which now looks much less important than it did not many years ago, but which still had real

influence in deteriorating moral judgment, was the career of the late sovereign of France. Some apparent advantages followed for a season from a rule which had its origin in a violent and perfidious usurpation, and which was upheld by all the arts of moral corruption, political enervation, and military repression. The advantages lasted long enough to create in this country a steady and powerful opinion that Napoleon the Third's early crime was redeemed by the seeming prosperity which followed. The shocking prematurity of this shallow condonation is now too glaringly visible for anyone to deny it. Not often in history has the great truth that morality is the nature of things received corroboration so prompt and timely."

Then, after pointing out that moral principles record uniformities of antecedence and consequence in the region of human conduct, Mr. Morley rightly says that "Want of faith in the persistence of these uniformities is only a little less fatuous in the moral order than a corresponding want of faith would instantly disclose itself to be in the purely physical order. In both orders there is only too much of this kind of fatuousness, this readiness to believe that once in our favor the stream shall flow up hill, that we may live in miasmatic air unpoisoned, that a government may depress the energy, the self-reliance, the public spirit of its citizens, and yet be able to count on these qualities whenever the government itself may have broken down, and left the country to make the best of such resources as are left after so severe and prolonged a drain. This is the sense in which morality is the nature of things. The system of the Second Empire was in the same sense an immoral system. Unless all the lessons of human experience were futile, and all the principles of political morality mere articles of pedantry, such a system must inevitably bring disaster, as we might have seen that it was sowing the seeds of disaster. Yet because the catastrophe lingered, opinion in England began to admit the possibility of evil being for this once good, and to treat any reference to the moral and political principles which condemned the imperial system, and all systems like it, beyond hope or appeal, as simply the pretext of mutinous or utopian impatience."

Who can read these words without gratitude to the writer for a statement of such incomparable clearness? The circumstances are different, the conflict in this instance

is on a colossal scale, but the principles involved are the same, so that we know perfectly well what will happen if Germany wins. This neo-Darwinian philosophy, which is not due to Darwin and is not accepted by representative biologists, but is merely the translation into intellectual terms of the lust for the wealth, trade and possessions of others and of a brutal and merciless disregard of the rights of small states, will be transformed into a gospel. And the truth of this gospel will be widely supposed to be established by the decision of nature in its favor. Its apostles will be "Messieurs les ministres du culte évangélique de l'armée du roi de Prusse" and those who refuse to accept the faith will have a hard time.

If, on the other hand, this long prepared and wonderfully organized attack upon the democratic peoples meets with a decisive defeat, one great, very great and permanent moral gain for the whole world will result from the war. For mankind can hardly fail to see and be impressed with the fact that Germany's disaster followed inevitably from her contempt for ethics. There is a moral order which she refused to recognize. This aroused the hostility of nearly all the civilized world against and ensured her defeat. There can be but one conclusion from the facts. If Germany, with the most perfect military and administrative mechanism in all history, with all its resources mobilized in preparation for a struggle which other nations could hardly believe possible and with deep-laid plans to stir up treason and revolution in other countries and if need be set the world on fire,—if with all this Germany fails, who can hope to succeed in such undertakings in the future? To make such an attempt will henceforth be recognized as suicidal; it is to dash one's self against the hard, sharp corners of the universe; it is to collide with the nature of things. The greatest hope of the world's peace depends not only on a German defeat, but also upon the clear perception by victors, vanquished and neutral spectators of the reason why this outcome was inevitable. We shall not feel secure, or be secure, until this great nation enters with her sister nations into the way of international law and co-operation and peace to walk henceforth therein, until all civilized peoples have the moral perception to see the signboard which stands over the entrance to every other road,—NO THOROUGHFARE.

Our failure would, then, tend to support the view that the nature of things decided for German autocracy as against

democratic institutions, and for the Kaiser's methods and principles in making, conducting and profiting by the war as against those who trusted in a moral order and tried to conform thereto not only their private life but their national and international policy. We would have to live in a world in which cynical might is apparently triumphant and ideals only beautiful dreams that ruin those who try to make them come true. Moreover, this regime would be fastened upon Germany as well as upon the rest of the world.

Which do we want and which shall we have? It must be the one or the other. The result depends more and more upon American intelligence, resourcefulness and the resolute use of our power to the end. When these issues, the real issues of the war, are seen, it is clear that our triumph will mean the salvation not only of ourselves, but ultimately of Germany as well, that is, if we assume that progress lies in the direction of human freedom and not in the direction of autocracy. The Persians were a noble race, but civilization depended upon the victory of Greece. The Saracens were knightly and valiant soldiers, but if they had conquered Europe would have been Mohammedan, the cross would have given way to the crescent, and woman would have had to enter the harem. The rough soldiers of Charles Martel saved Europe and Christendom.

Once more civilization, as least the free type of civilization that we love, is in mortal peril. We must fight with all we have and are. I believe we shall triumph. If we should not, who would care to live? We did not make the crisis. It is ours to face it with clear intelligence, resolute with courage and hope. We may reasonably hope that when the German people are cured of their belief in conquest, when they are disillusioned, as the French people were a century ago, they will be ready to enter the fraternity of nations as an equal among equals and without aspiring to impose their social type upon the rest. When this time comes, the last great struggle of men against men will, perhaps, be over. For if the nations now at war combine to have peace, nobody else can fight. Then all peoples will together engage in the one great war that will last to the end of our race, namely, that against chaos, ignorance, poverty and disease, and in this war, like different regiments in one army, march all one way.

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